



Cooney State Park Draft Management Plan Public Comments Report March 2012

In February 2012, Montana State Parks held two open houses—one in Billings, and one in Roberts—to gather public comments on the Cooney State Park Draft Management Plan. A total of 21 people attended, with 13 people at the Billings meeting, and 8 people at the Roberts meeting including two Carbon County Commissioners and a District Representative. Montana State Parks received 11 comments during the 21-day public comment period from February 10 to March 2. All comments were from individuals, and one comment was submitted from a Carbon County Commissioner.

A number of themes emerged from the public comments, as well as suggestions for improvement of the park experience. Following is a discussion of the comments grouped by major themes.

Public Safety

Eight comments mentioned public safety as a primary concern at Cooney State Park regarding overcrowding, the need for a law enforcement presence, and hunting conflicts. Overcrowding was consistently mentioned as a problem both on the water and within the campgrounds. Many people feel the park is at its capacity, and are cautious to support projects that would increase the use at the park. Still, a few comments voiced support for expanding opportunities in the right locations that might offset the crowds in other areas of the park. The problem of overcrowding spreads multiple themes and is discussed in further detail below.

The desire to see a strong law enforcement presence was also mentioned, and people support the park's public safety initiative that began in 2011 with the hiring of the full-time law Park Warden.

Additionally, one comment expressed concern for potential user conflicts between increasing year-round visitation and hunting. According to the comment, which was provided by a neighboring landowner, hunting is already a public safety issue with shooting from the road and vehicles, and trespassing onto private land.

Camping

Seven comments discussed camping, including expanded opportunities, the camping reservation system, and the desire to see modern amenities. People generally favored expanded camping opportunities, particularly boat-in campsites at Red Lodge Campground. Boat-in camping is very popular, and people felt more sites could help reduce overcrowding in the campgrounds and enhance the visitor experience.

Two comments addressed the campsite reservation system specifically. One person expressed dissatisfaction with reservation system when campers are a no-show, which leaves the campsite vacant when others could use it. Conversely, one person felt the reservation system has helped improve the camping experience. Finally, one person expressed concern that the

park was actually losing camping opportunities as a result of increased day-use and the reservation system [tying up camping spots].

Two comments expressed the desire to see more modern amenities, including more electrical hookups and landline phones at the campgrounds and day use sites.

One person expressed an interest in volunteer days to improve campsites by involving the park users in upkeep of the park. One person suggested offering discount camping rates Monday-Thursday to encourage more weekday use during the summer.

Boating

Boating was another major theme with five comments addressing boating, including boating safety and expanded opportunities. Four comments addressed boating safety specifically, and many more alluded to it in regards to overcrowding. Several comments expressed support for better enforcement of boating safety, more boater education that touched on boating ethics and etiquette, and enforcement of the correct boating direction, particularly related to personal watercrafts and boats towing water skiers and inner tubes. One comment suggested a horse power limit of 25 HP for motors or promoting the use of electric motors.

Several comments also expressed support for additional boat-in campsites, while a few also thought that widening the boat ramp would help alleviate some of the congestion, particularly if more campsites are added in the future to the Red Lodge Campground.

Road Maintenance

Road maintenance was a dominant conversation at both the Billings and Roberts meetings. Four comments were submitted regarding roads, including one from a Carbon County Commissioner. The roads leading to the park are gravel roads maintained by the County. Several people felt the burden of maintaining the roads should not be carried solely by the County, but instead provided as a cost share between the County and Montana State Parks, as maintaining the roads is costly for the Carbon County taxpayers. The Carbon County Commissioner suggested budgeting \$7500 to \$8000 a year for dust control.

Many people felt that the volume and kind of traffic on the roads is creating expensive long-term maintenance problems, particularly along the Lake Shore Road and the section of the Red Lodge Creek Road from Lake Shore Road to Red Lodge Campground. Three people did not want to see the roads paved, as it could create other problems related to speeding and concerns of ice during the winter, and would rather see annual dust control. One person suggested paving the South Shore Road. Several people expressed concern that increasing use at the park would exacerbate the problem, while one person expressed support for developing park facilities if road problems are resolved.

Trail

Three comments highlighted support for a walking/biking trail. Two people provided suggestions for the trail development and activities along the way, including foot bridges and geocaching.

Fishing

Two comments highlighted fishing as one of the main park attractions, although both alluded to the poor quality and quantity of fish in the reservoir. They support continued stocking of fish, and one person suggested specific kinds of fish to improve the fishing quality and quantity.

Natural Resources

Two comments addressed natural resources at the park, including the diversity of tree species and the growing problem of noxious weeds. One person supports diversifying tree species, but suggests using Sichuan Elms instead of ash trees, which are currently being devastated by the invasive emerald ash borer (insect) on the eastern United States. One comment addressed the problem of knapweed spreading from adjacent DNRC lands onto private land.